

“Building Connections: Creative Business and Sussex Humanities Lab”

ESRC Impact Accelerator Account Project Report and Recommendations

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Introduction

In February 2020 we applied, and were successful, in obtaining an ESRC ‘Impact Accelerator Account’ funding through Research and Enterprise at Sussex on the topic, ‘Sussex Humanities Lab and Brighton’s Creative Industries’ - a section of the project proposal follows;

The remit of the Sussex Humanities Lab is to develop and expand research into how digital technologies are shaping our culture and society and there is significant and potentially impactful work happening in the Lab, which has the potential to contribute a deeper and more thoughtful development of our digital society. However, we recognise that there is a disconnect between the Lab and creative industries in Brighton, which represent a large part of a critical digital cluster in the city valued at £1bn pa and which are making the products and designing the experiences that the work in the Lab should be influencing.

Although there is some limited awareness of the Lab in the creative industries in the city, this project will foster closer relationships between the lab and those creative industries in Brighton and Hove with a view to building new research and bidding opportunities and will facilitate understanding of the needs of creative industries and how the lab can usefully collaborate in new research projects.¹

The imperative for this work stemmed from the Lab’s ‘Community and Business Engagement Group’ and of a want to better understand our relationship with creative business in Brighton. We know that Lab members engage with various organisations and groups in Brighton but were unsure of the depth of those relationships or indeed how, or if, the Lab is perceived or known beyond the groups that we, as Lab members, engage with. Importantly, we were also interested in learning the ways in which we could better engage with independent, creative business in Brighton and Hove, and contribute to the development of Brighton’s digital cluster in a manner that ***aligned with our values of tech for good and social inclusion.***

The work was scheduled to take place between March - May 2020, however, industrial action and COVID 19 had a significant impact on our ability to start and complete this work. Laurence Hill, SHL and MAH

¹ Further details of the proposal can be found in Appendix 1.

Visiting Fellow, carried out the research captured in the report below. This work included gathering information from Lab members about their engagement with creative industry in Brighton and thereafter interviewing creative business, as well as reviewing the Lab's online presence. Hill's involvement with this project was crucial - they are a bridge between the Lab and creative industry and as such can provide an alternative perspective of the Lab's identity and how it is perceived outside of academia.

Below is an executive summary of findings and thereafter a more in-depth report, which includes a number of recommendations. It should be noted, however, that the findings and recommendations are drawn from the observations of an outsider looking in, and they therefore should be reviewed as such. Some of the findings are things we already knew (or at least suspected), and some recommendations are similar to actions we have trailed or previously discussed. In this sense, the report's findings and recommendations reinforces the need to resource certain areas of the Lab's activities, such as communication strategy.

Executive summary

Building connections and shared understandings;

Through this work we discovered a disconnect between what we, the Lab, define or perceive as creative industry, and how that industry defines itself. Conversely, we discovered that 'digital humanities' is not broadly understood in industry. This is perhaps unsurprising given the fact the DH community continually tries to (re)define itself and its borders. The SHL is a digital humanities lab, but it does not, and has not, tried to define the term. While this has been somewhat deliberate, we may need to give some thought to a broad engagement with the term in order to collaborate with creative industry partners. It was also evident that many did not understand the function and set up of the Lab, especially with relation to the technical expertise that exists among members and the team.

Location and Communication;

There are two significant barriers to the Lab's engagement with the creative industry in Brighton and Hove - our campus location and our communication strategy. Both, however, provide an opportunity - to revisit how we use our physical space, how we engage with the city and how we cultivate our online presence and "brand".

Priorities and Vision;

During the course of this research, one interviewee noted “[the Lab] could be an important node in the [Brighton digital] network” - they identified a hub as something that was missing from the city. If the Lab wants to prioritise this engagement with the creative industry we need to articulate the value of this engagement, for the Lab as well as creative industries - what is our desired impact, our vision for engagement and how might we prioritise these.

Crucially, the Lab and the creative industries who took part in this research shared concerns and questions around *the impacts of digital on culture and society* - how might we leverage this concern and develop collaborations that address social, political and cultural inequalities that lie at the heart of a lot of our work.

Research Methodology and Findings

Research Method 1: *Scoping exercise with Lab members*

The first stage of this project was an email questionnaire to members of the lab to scope out any current connections with creative industry businesses in the city and to ask what the value of those connections might be for members of the Lab. The response to this questionnaire was fairly muted (we received 10 responses) but we received enough information to draw some conclusions.

It quickly became clear that there was some confusion over the terms creative industries and creative businesses:

‘...It all depends on the definitions I guess - creativity and business are in the eye of the beholder’.

This may have occurred from a lack of clarity on our part - we didn’t explicitly define what we meant by a creative business or creative industry by *which we would mean a for-profit organisation engaged in creative work and/or work with cultural organisations*. A number of the people responding listed work they had done or ongoing connections with what we would call cultural organisations such as Fabrica, ONCA, South East Dance and so on. However, a number of creative businesses in the city were referenced either through a Lab connection or as guest lecturers on various courses and these are referenced below.

What does successful engagement look like?

We gained some responses to our questions around the benefits of connection with creative businesses:

‘...Workshops around identified areas of commonality that enable greater understanding and start of shared language.’

The responses to this question highlighted two areas in particular, firstly that it was likely that there are shared concerns and questions around **the impacts of digital on culture and society**, which are being approached from different angles in business and academia and that working in partnership to address those concerns and questions would be of enormous benefit. Secondly, on a practical level that representatives from creative businesses would be regular attendees at Lab events, be invited to appear on panels alongside Lab members and to give industry-focused seminars, which would bring benefits to the Lab;

‘SHL seminars attracting creative industry audiences on a returning basis. SHL seminars being given by creative industry bods - and drawing an academic crowd’

What might be the benefit to business of connecting with the Lab?

The responses here were aligned with responses to the successful engagement question and highlighted again that there must be shared areas of enquiry and concern but there was also the sense that **members find it challenging to articulate what value the Lab might have.**

What might be the value to SHL of better connections with creative business?

It was generally felt that connection with businesses would help to keep research grounded in the real world and bring practical skills to the Lab that are currently missing, for example platform building. It could also lead to the development of joint funding bids for projects.

But how these connections are fostered and developed needs consideration.

Summary

Although, as stated, the responses to the questionnaire we sent were pretty sparse, there were enough that we could get a sense of where the value of potential engagement with creative businesses was felt to lay. As will be seen below many of the points raised were reiterated in our conversations with businesses.

Research Method 2: Scoping exercise with creative businesses.

This process was intended to gauge awareness of the lab and interest in engagement. We initially approached three creative businesses that had some connection with either the Lab or the University as

identified as above and then found another two businesses with no current connection. We spoke with the following creative businesses;

- *Cogapp – Alex Morrison*

Cogapp is a digital project agency that works largely with cultural organisations to help them make better use of digital technology often focused around making large amounts of content available online.

- *Mnemoscene – Sophie Dixon*

Mnemoscene is a business that works with web and immersive technologies primarily for the cultural and heritage sector.

- *Clearleft – Chris How*

Clearleft is a digital design agency working with clients to create, design, code and deliver digital products and services.

- *Surface Impression – Peter Pavement*

Surface Impression is a digital media development company specialising in working with the cultural sector and non-profits.

- *Fresh Egg – Duncan Heath*

Fresh Egg is a digital marketing agency focusing on the perspective of customer experience and working with charities and not for profit organisations.

Our conversations with these businesses were based on a series of simple prompt questions that differed slightly depending on whether there was existing knowledge of the Lab.² The critical questions focused on the value to the business of engagement with the Lab and what the barriers to that engagement might be.

Value of engagement

All of the businesses that we included in this project could see the benefits of engagement with the Lab and the following are some of the reasons that they identified;

'We're really excited about the Humanities Lab, it does feel unique, feels like an exciting thing to be there'

'The business value is acquiring knowledge from people who are deeply thinking about a topic'

They thought that engagement would offer access to valuable thinking and that they in turn ***might bring practical skills that are missing from the Lab*** - some also felt that there was kudos in collaborating with a respected university.

² See Appendix 2

There is value in joining up sectors that are broadly exploring the same questions around the impacts of digital technology and an understanding that bringing business and academia together creates something more powerful than the sum of its parts.

'There is value in meeting potential collaborators'

Digital agencies often need to bring in specialists to work on client's projects and engagement with the Lab would offer **network building opportunities** with a wider range of people that are lacking elsewhere. Taking part or helping deliver events is seen as a good opportunity for staff development and reiterates the value of collaboration as a two-way street.

'People from [...] maybe coming and talking at those events, giving a real world spin on the stuff that is there'

From a business perspective, engagement might offer improved ways of working and result in better products.

Across the businesses we talked to there was a concern about the impacts of digital on society and culture and a sense that their sector has historically been, and often still is, reluctant to address those impacts and the damage that has been caused. They are all interested in doing what they can to mitigate negative impacts and knowing that these issues are under consideration in the Lab, they felt that discussion and joined up thinking could have lasting value in both sectors.

Barriers to engagement

The barriers to engagement can broadly be drawn around understanding and practicalities. Among the businesses without connection to the Lab and who were completely unaware of it, there was not a clear understanding of what digital humanities are or what kind of thinking is happening in the Lab that might have meaning and or value for a business. Even among the businesses that have a connection with the Lab, have been to events and so on, the feeling was that the Lab is opaque and that it's unclear what the Lab is, what it does and what might be there.

This leads to a feeling that *'there is more value [in the Lab] than we're able to access right now'*

In terms of practicalities, a common theme was the accessibility of the Lab geographically. The location in Falmer is broadly seen as a disincentive to engagement – the difficulty of getting people to Falmer is a

challenge that ACCA also faces so holding some events in central Brighton would be valuable. Additionally, the campus itself is seen as challenging to navigate.

'Raising awareness of where it is and that it's not that difficult to get to, would be good'

Other concerns focused on the fact that events all happen during business hours and on the marketing of events and it being unclear who would and wouldn't be welcomed.

Communications

Across the board there was interest in exploring a connection with the Lab though this ranged from very keen to 'would need to be convinced of the business case'. There are however a number of things to be considered and the first and most important of those is communication and a consideration of the Lab's communication follows.

Looking at the Lab's online presence was a key part of this funding bid and we proposed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Lab's online presence and how its messaging reads to a potential non-affiliated audience.

'As a showcase of what's going on and an implied invitation to engage – it's very difficult'

The website should be the most important asset in the Lab's communications and while recognising that it has recently been reworked, and that there are strictures imposed by having to use University templates, there are a number of issues that were flagged by businesses or arose from our observations.

Primarily what is missing is an overarching statement of what digital humanities are and the role of the Lab in exploring them. Without those as a basis on which to build it becomes difficult to understand and make sense of such a wide range of research projects, difficult to understand what joins it all together. There is an implicit assumption of knowledge that makes it hard for non-affiliated audiences to engage.

'People don't understand what digital humanities is, what kind of things and thoughts are here that might have meaning'

There are also issues with language - the site is very language driven, which may be down to the restrictions of the University templates but large swathes of text can be difficult to engage with.

There is confusion about the intended audience too - ***is the site intended solely for an academic audience or for a wider public?*** In terms of engagement it must be the latter, in which case the

language used lacks clarity and coherence - it reads as if written by a number of different people and without consideration of the end user.

'There is a sense sometimes of - is it open to everyone? Would I feel comfortable or really out of place? [...] reframing how things are presented so they are more accessible would be good'

The Lab hosts many events but there is no dedicated space to access recordings, photos etc. Our experiences of the Lab inform us that, pre-COVID, it is an active, lively space. However, there is no evidence of this. Additionally, the voice of the Lab and its core members (i.e. Directors, Co-Directors, etc) cannot be found. For example, publications like Harvell and Ball (2017), "Why We Need to Find Time for Digital Humanities: Presenting a New Partnership Model at the University of Sussex" gives voice to the Lab - something that is lacking from the current site.³

Next we looked at the Lab's **social media presence** and it feels clear that currently, and understandably for capacity reasons, there is little focus on social media and there doesn't appear to be a discernible strategy, which was born out in conversation with Kate Malone and Amelia Wakeford who are primarily responsible.

We didn't consider the Facebook account which appears inactive, and instead focused on the Lab's Twitter account. We did this both by looking at the account ourselves and by feeding it into an online social media analysis service - this was done before the summer and looking back over six months of activity.

Without going into too much detail a few things stood out - **the majority of the activity (78%) is retweets** and there were **no replies both of which indicate a lack of proactivity in generating content or starting/maintaining conversation**. The predominance of retweets gives extra weight to the most prolific tweeters among the membership and skews the overall picture. Retweets and event notifications also do not give voice to the Lab, its values or priorities.

Only **5% of tweets contained any media which is known to increase engagement** and of all the hashtags used, as identified by the online analysis, only two #datafeminism and #reanimatingdata seemed directly related to Lab activity.

³ Harvell, Jane, and Joanna Ball. 2017. "Why We Need to Find Time for Digital Humanities: Presenting a New Partnership Model at the University of Sussex". *Insights* 30 (3): 38–43. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.377>

As with the website, the social media accounts feel unclear as to what the target audience is and the content thus appears unfocused and unclear, which make it difficult for non-affiliated audiences to understand and engage.

Recommended actions

Communications

If increased engagement and connection building with creative industries or other non-affiliated audiences is a goal for the Lab, then in the first instance there should be some thought given to

- Setting up a subgroup to pay focused attention to the development of all outward facing communications, which should also be regularly reviewed at team meetings.
- Reviewing the website - focusing on language and considering the end user(s)
- Reviewing social media use and develop a simple, achievable plan (LH can help with this). In the short term consider putting a pinned post on Facebook pointing to where you are more active.
- Review the language used for marketing events by considering non-academic audiences

Boosting engagement with creative businesses

This is a longer-term commitment and will need focus. We would consider a stepped approach derived from audience development strategies and based on four levels of engagement as follows.

- Awareness – know the lab exists
- Slight engagement – sign up to newsletter/look at website/follow on social
- Deeper engagement – attend/deliver events
- Full engagement – collaborate on research and development

At any given time you would have ongoing relationships with creative businesses at all levels and the goal is to progress them through to full engagement though that won't happen with all of them.

The awareness/slight engagement levels require committing to the communications actions as detailed above. We would also recommend considering 'show and tell' type events once or twice a year - preferably held in central Brighton at a coworking space such as Platf9rm, which has a built in and possibly sympathetic audience. These would have added value by including the participation of interested businesses such as Cogapp.

SHL should be taking opportunities for raising awareness at events away from the Lab which have a Lab affiliation, where Lab members are participating or where making a connection with the Lab would be valuable.

'I first met Sharon outside the Lab and Alex got in touch via Twitter, so the connections I made with people weren't necessarily at the Lab, they were outside.'

Starting to build a database of business contacts would also be very valuable at this stage so they can be contacted directly about events even if they are already on the mailing list.

'Things can go under my radar'

Deeper engagement requires a proactive approach in making personal invitations to events and consideration of inviting participation in event delivery from a business.

'Having a community of people thinking about this together would be great'

There was also considerable interest from all the businesses we spoke to in the idea of there being a space in which to bring together academics and businesses to think through some of the challenges that are arising in the implementation of digital. Bringing together different sectors working to some of the same questions/concerns is potentially very rich and powerful. We would also recommend having artists as part of this conversation who bring a third way of thinking.

'It's quite ad hoc, the idea of a connected network in Brighton - nobody's doing a great job of that'

This space doesn't currently exist in Brighton and Hove and making that case could be a valuable opportunity for the Lab to make itself a hub for those conversations.

'Having a lab that's open [...] bringing together practitioners, academics and businesses, that could be really interesting'

"[The Lab] could be an important node in the network, which is missing"

There are a limited number of businesses in Brighton & Hove that are engaged in digital humanities work or whose work culture would encourage connection with the Lab but that makes the development and deepening of connections a more achievable target. Bringing some of them into a space as described would hasten that deeper/full engagement.

Conclusions

The Impact Accelerator Account project has increased the Lab's engagement with creative business in Brighton and Hove, and has opened up new opportunities for further engagement and knowledge exchange. The dialogue with creative business and the findings demonstrates a desire for creative business to work with the Lab and highlights mechanisms for the Lab to increase impact. However, there exists a capacity and resource issue - how can the Lab implement some of the recommendations and how do we keep the conversation and momentum of this work going?

The Lab also needs to be clear on what we are "selling" - we need a clear statement on the benefits of engaging with the Lab, of what DH means to us and of the mutual benefits of collaboration.

One remit of the ESRC IAA required closer connection with research "users" - the findings demonstrate that creative industry would like to part of the active research of the Lab and to learn from it - there is a definite appetite to work on technology for social justice and to engage with the Lab's critiques of digital tools, environments and systems. One of the Lab's strengths is highlighting bias in technology, of working with community groups and organisations - we have an opportunity to shape how creative industry think about their practice and in turn the products, applications and tools they develop. This speaks directly to one of the ESRC, IAA the foundational pillars, of 'mobilising knowledge, impact and engagement'.

Summary of suggested actions

- Review the website
 - COVID provides an opportunity for the lab to create a retrospective of its events over the past five years. It is an opportunity to release digital content that advertises the Lab's work, priorities and significance.
 - Project listing - more visual material would amplify the Labs work and bring project work to life.
 - Is there an archive of video or audio clips from events? There is no sense of the Lab's legacy, history.
- Review language used for event marketing

- Set up subcommittee to lead on communications
 - Develop simple, achievable social media plan
 - A weekly or monthly twitter “take over” by a Lab member would amplify the values and priorities of the Lab - since the Lab is its members and the community it is involved with giving voice to this is important.
 - Set up ‘show and tell’ events in Brighton with some business participation
 - Raise awareness at events outside the Lab
 - Build database of interested businesses for direct marketing
 - Consider involvement of non-academic participants in panels and at events
 - Consider creating a space that brings together different communities to explore issues around digital humanities
 - Consider an exploratory piece of work to consider what DH looks like outside of academia.
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Covid 19 project adjustments

In addition to the extension of the timeline, we had to make some other adjustments due to the impact of Covid 19.

- We had originally intended to make an application to Arts Council England for activity to support this research. As the virus took hold, ACE closed down all of their funding schemes so they could focus on planning and launching emergency funding for artists and cultural organisations. Their regular funding streams are now back online but there was a mismatch with our timeline.
- Secondly, we had planned a meet up at the Lab at the end of the project for the businesses but as it became clear that was not possible we have put that on hold.

Appendix 1

Impact Accelerator Account Proposal

Project Description

We stand at a critical moment in the ongoing development of our digital society where we see inequities and systemic prejudices replicated in online spaces. The work that SHL does in seeking to understand the impact of digital technologies needs to be connected in a meaningful way with the digital cluster in Brighton and Hove.

Impact

The remit of the Sussex Humanities Lab is to develop and expand research into how digital technologies are shaping our culture and society and there is significant and potentially impactful work happening in the Lab, which has the potential to contribute a deeper and more thoughtful development of our digital society.

However, we recognise that there is a disconnect between the Lab and creative industries in Brighton, which represent a large part of a critical digital cluster in the city valued at £1bn pa and which are making the products and designing the experiences that the work in the Lab should be influencing.

Although there is some limited awareness of the Lab in the creative industries in the city, this project will foster closer relationships between the lab and those creative industries in Brighton and Hove with a view to building new research and bidding opportunities and will facilitate understanding of the needs of creative industries and how the lab can usefully collaborate in new research projects.

The project will be a starting point for exploration, it will enable larger bids and research development and collaborative projects as relationships strengthen.

The proposed activities

1. Initial work would consist of a scoping exercise carried out by Laurence Hill, to look at areas of research in the Lab in order to make connections outwards to creative industries.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the Lab's online presence and how its messaging reads to a potential non-affiliated audience.

3. This project is conceived with a view to making the connections and collaborations built, a two-way process. Geographically, this would mean taking the work of the Lab into businesses and the community and then bringing representatives of those businesses back to the Lab.
4. The initial phase of the proposed project would be a scoping exercise with a number of creative businesses in the city - for the initial part of this project, we would target 5 or 6 businesses (e.g. Brandwatch). This process would gauge awareness of the lab and interest in engagement.
5. This activity would also be a process of advocacy for the Lab and would start to bid a network of advocates - for example, we know that CogApp, a creative business, have attended lab events so they would potentially be the starting point in developing such a network.

Original Timeline of activities

March;

- review of SHL's online presence and recommendations made to Core group
- review of activity happening in the Lab
- identifying and approaching creative businesses
- develop bid to ACE for further activity

April;

- meetings with creative businesses and
- development of further bids
- network and sharing event in the lab for creative industries

May;

- report back to a meeting of the Lab's Core group
- report back to creative businesses engaged in the scoping exercise
- make outcomes available online
- continue bid development to engage further with creative industries

Appendix 2

Questions prompts re SHL for organisations with some knowledge of the Lab

Can you explain what [your organisation] does?

When and how did you first become aware of the Lab?

What has been your connection – with who & with what particular areas of research?

What has been the value to Clearleft of engaging with the lab?

Is there anything more that you'd like to get out of the connection?

How would you encourage other creative businesses to get involved?

Would you be interested in attending twice yearly events – where members of the Lab talked about some of the research that's happening?

Question prompts re SHL for organisations with no knowledge of the Lab

Can you explain what [your organisation] does?

Does [your organisation] have any connections with Universities/Humanities Labs as research or project partners?

Are you aware of the Sussex Humanities Lab? (Explain if not)

Given that explanation (+ your own knowledge), can you see a value for Surface Impression in being engaged with the Lab?

What would hinder that engagement?

What would encourage it?

Would you be interested in attending twice yearly events – where members of the Lab talked about some of the research that's happening?